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ABSTRACT

In 1971, the State of Alabama Legislature passed Act 106, "Mandatory Education for the Exceptional Child," which mandated that all exceptional children were to receive appropriate special education services no later than 1975-76. Five hundred new teacher units were authorized for each of the interim fiscal years, and new graduate and preservice teacher programs were initiated. Unfortunately, too many teachers remained untrained and uncertified, and in-service training received a low priority compared to preservice. A Reality Oriented Teacher Education Program (ROTE), requiring both faculty and students to work in the field, was instituted. This program placed advanced undergraduate special education majors (prior to student teaching) in classrooms where they had full responsibility for instruction on a one-day or half-day basis. Their presence released the regularly employed teacher to attend, for credit and with no cost to the school system, field-based course instruction from college and university instructors. Thus, faculty members not only taught in the field but also interacted with school personnel in actual school settings. Courses were based strictly on teacher needs. Student interns coordinated their teaching activities with the regular teacher to ensure maximum continuity and interrelation of instruction for the children. (Author/JA)

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R * O * T * E

REALITY ORIENTED TEACHER EDUCATION

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SUMMARY

REALITY ORIENTED TEACHER EDUCATION

During the summer of 1971, the State of Alabama Legislature passed Act 106, "Mandatory Education for the Exceptional Child." This Act mandated that all exceptional children were to receive appropriate special educational services no later than the 1975-76 school year.

In order to implement this Act and meet the 1975 deadline 500 new teacher units were authorized for each of the following fiscal years which resulted in a need for 1,000 new teachers. Available trained teachers were few in numbers, less than 200, which resulted in a large number of teachers being recruited from existing regular education positions. These teachers were then required to work as quickly as possible toward certification in special education.

College and university programs geared up to meet this challenge by offering summer session programs at the master's level and instituting new pre-service programs at the undergraduate level. However, even with these efforts far too many teachers remained untrained and uncertified in the field. Too, inservice activity for those already trained was minimized due to the high priority on pre-service and retraining of regular educators.

In an effort to correct the above as well as to provide a more realistic orientation to pre-service teacher education for students in special education, a program was instituted which required both faculty and students to work in the field. An all out effort to provide combined realistic in-service, pre-service, and certification training was formally initiated in a reality oriented teacher education program (ROTE).

This program places advanced undergraduate special education majors (prior to student teaching) in classrooms where they have full responsibility for instruction on a one-day or half-day basis. Their utilization releases the regularly employed teacher to attend field-based course instruction for credit from college and university instructors with no cost to the school systems. Thus, faculty members not only teach in the field but interact with school personnel in actual school settings as well. Courses are taught based strictly on teacher needs. Student interns coordinate their teaching activities with the regular teacher to insure maximum continuity and interrelation of instruction for the children.

The program provides both service and instruction far away from the University campus in the most real setting possible - the rural public school. The unique interactions between student, active teacher, and college faculty member have been most rewarding and the great number of requests for continuation of the program definitely attest to its merit as a training technique.

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R*O*T*E
REALITY ORIENTED TEACHER EDUCATION

Introduction

Teacher education has long been criticized for its operating Ivory Tower oriented programs within Colleges of Education frequently far removed from the locus of educational activity -- the school. This criticism is not completely valid because most Colleges of Education have requested and/or required that their students observe, participate, and do student teaching in actual school settings. With the continued phase-out of laboratory schools formerly used for early student exposure teacher education programs have more or less been forced to go to the field.

The criticism, while partially met, is by no means removed. Teacher education programs now tend to make school systems in close proximity to them their laboratory schools. Students are often compacted into those schools nearby the training institution and seldom dispersed to schools in more distant systems. The reasons for such action are quickly obvious both from fiscal and human resource standpoints. It is difficult to provide supervision over broad areas, transportation for both students and faculty is costly to provide, and the contact points are too numerous to effectively coordinate. There are likely other reasons which may also be used to further substantiate the rationale for compacting preservice training and educational exposure in proximately located schools.

The results, however, are equally obvious. The compacted school quickly loses its identify as a "realistic" site as it becomes more and more a routine placement facility for students in training. The compacted school soon has students observing other students in classrooms crowded with their peers from various University programs.

The compacted school soon becomes an adjunctive laboratory school.

The above problem, which has become acute in regular education, is maximized considerably for special education. The reason for its magnification is simply one of numbers. Exceptional children constitute approximately 12% of a typical or average school system's enrollment. Within this 12% are certain categories of exceptionality with prevalence rates of less than 1 per 10,000 school-age children. As a result, securing sufficient numbers of children with exceptionalities to develop special classes, resource rooms, etc. is more difficult to accomplish. In highly rural areas the problem is even further amplified.

The State of Alabama has an additional problem in special education which also impacts upon the above. This problem relates to the large numbers of non-certified or provisionally certified personnel currently active as teachers in the public schools. The State of Alabama now supports approximately 2,230 special education teacher units. Only one-half of all teachers active in these units have achieved maximum certification. This results in a dearth of qualified personnel to serve as supervisors or critic teachers of students in pre-service programs.

The problem is thus a two-fold one for the State of Alabama relative to the preparation of personnel as teachers for exceptional children. Preservice practica sites need to be developed as well as inservice opportunities provided for active certified and non-certified teachers.

The College of Education through its Area of Special Education initiated a program to resolve each of the above problems. The program entitled, "Reality Oriented Teacher Education (R*O*T*E)" is an innovative program which integrates both preservice and inservice training components. These components are provided in the most realistic setting possible -- the rural public schools of Alabama.

Program Objectives

The objectives of the program are multidimensional in that they serve basically four populations: university teacher trainees, university students, public school teachers and administrators, and handicapped children. The specific objectives are as follows:

1) To provide a reality oriented program of practica for students majoring in special education in the field - not on-campus or in campus-proximate schools;

2) To assist in upgrading personnel in the field in or nearby their employment settings;

3) To actively involve university special education faculty in field-based instruction within public school settings; and

4) To provide a service-demonstration dimension to rural public school systems within the region served by the University of Alabama.

Program Evolution and Development

ROTE, like many educational programs, grew out of a felt need by both rural public schools and the University's Area of Special Education. The public schools of Walker County, Alabama were desperately trying to up-grade a large number of provisionally qualified teachers in their special education programs. Being a very rural and deprived county there were no fiscal resources available to contract out for specialized inservice sessions, workshops, etc. and especially nothing of sufficient quality or duration to warrant University credit.

The University meanwhile had a number of students ready for practica assignments of a more intensive nature. The Special Education Area's utilization of the public schools in the proximate region was extremely high since beginning and advanced students received experiences in the latter. Too, special education students were not typically receiving a realistic view of rural educational problems facing the handicapped child. There was a real need to build in this realism prior to the student's taking positions in rural systems for which they lacked appropriate

exposure.

With the preceding as background what follows is a descriptive study of R*O*T*E as it has evolved for the special education students in training, the teachers seeking certification and inservice training, and the faculty of the Area of Special Education.

During the Fall 1972 academic semester the Special Education Area was contacted by the Coordinator of Special Education for the Walker County Schools to assess the Area's interest in helping certify and up-grade the latter's special education personnel. At the time only nine of the twenty-seven teachers teaching in Walker County were fully certified. Many of these teachers required courses which were not offered on-campus in the evenings or off-campus via continuing education. A large number of the teachers required basic methods and materials courses which are infrequently, if ever, offered off-campus. The heavy reliance upon a variety of instructional materials available on-campus but not in the field is a primary reason for not offering these courses off-campus.

Walker County also presented a different kind of problem in terms of its economic and general environmental milieu. The County is very rural and rather seriously deprived both economically and educationally. One of the schools located in the County still has an outdoor toilet facility and water brought in from a well. An economy which once flourished upon the strip mining of coal no longer does so. The County is actively seeking new industry for its residents. Unemployment is quite high and many persons work at jobs outside of the County itself, which tends to give it a "bedroom" or "suburban" image. Economically, however, such an image is grossly inappropriate.

The Walker County problem was presented to the faculty in special education

for their reaction and decision relative to the provision of direct assistance. Student input was also secured through the graduate and undergraduate representatives at the faculty meetings. Faculty members were informed that service to Walker County would be an overload with no extra payment provided. However, students were informed that time spent in classrooms within Walker County would count for internship credit.

After considerable discussion the faculty voted to develop a program which would help Walker County alleviate its training and retraining problems on a one semester trial basis. After the completion of one semester the faculty expressed a desire to review the project in an effort to determine its merits for continuation and expansion to other rural counties.

Having indicated their willingness to undertake the responsibility for conducting a field-based training program, the faculty and staff of the Special Education Area made arrangements with Walker County School officials to formally implement the R*O*T*E project. While a more formal overview is provided in Appendix A, the following key elements were hallmarks of the project:

1) Each Friday during the second semester of 1972-73, special education teachers in Walker County were released from their classrooms to attend classes taught by University of Alabama permanent faculty.

2) Each released teacher was replaced by a student intern from the University of Alabama. Each student was preparing to become a special education teacher and had either completed, or was enrolled in, a methods and techniques of instruction course.

3) Transportation was provided by the Area of Special Education for students through the use of leased multi-passenger vans.

4) Faculty members from the Area of Special Education team-taught six different courses or eighteen total semester credit hours.

5) Practicum supervisors from the Area visited regularly each student intern and conducted periodic seminars to assess the appropriateness of their placements.

6) Students enrolled in the special education survey course, SPE 220, conducted concurrently within R*O*T*E a comprehensive survey of all special education services in the County. The survey results were provided to the County Schools for their utilization in future planning and development. (See Appendix B)

7) No charge was made to the schools for this project. Transportation costs, etc. were all absorbed by the University. Teachers were requested to pay $69 for every three hour course taken via the project.

8) On Fridays when students were unable to participate due to illness, etc. faculty members were called upon to serve as substitutes. This included the Area Chairman.

Results

The project accomplished a great deal for all parties involved. Through the project a total of twenty-eight (28) preservice trainees received a major interaction with the field in a very real way. As a group these students provided 2,352 hours of actual classroom instruction as substitutes for the system's regularly employed special class teachers. Four hundred and twenty (420) handicapped students were taught during these 2,352 hours. All of this provided at no cost to the Walker County School system.

Twenty-eight (28) regularly employed teachers were released during the project's duration each Friday. These teachers received an average of six (6) semester hours credit each for their participation in the certification or in-service courses.

The Special Education Area faculty contributed approximately 924 hours of instructional time alone to the program. Another concentrated block of time was allocated for practicum supervision.

Evaluation

Upon completion of the Walker County R*O*T*E Project, a faculty-student evaluation was made to determine future directions for field-based training instructional programs. Generally, all personnel expressed great satisfaction with what the project had achieved during the semester. However, a number of recommendations were

made to modify the program and thereby make it more efficacious. The primary recommendations (and the rationale for them) are as follows:

1) Only one, possibly two courses should be offered under such a program. Six courses tend to disrupt the on-going campus program too much as well as create some possible proliferation and overlap among the courses themselves. Both certification and in-service dimensions should be considered.

2) No more than a half-day should be provided to release teachers for in-service training, workshops, etc. Preferably, released time should be made available in the afternoon.

3) Car pools, which may go directly to several sites, should be planned. Dropping off students from vans at the various schools creates a major logistical problem.

4) Students who replace the teachers should develop lesson plans which integrate and interrelate with the classroom teachers on-going programs. This will insure continuity and a developmental base for both the children and the student intern.

5) In-service instruction provided through the field-based courses should be coordinated with a needs analysis of the teacher's own instructional needs.

There was unanimous agreement that the program be continued and expanded to include other counties on a rotating basis. The latter would insure that all counties within the University's service region could avail themselves of field-based instruction. At the same time, it would serve to prevent stretching faculty resources too thin.

R*O*T*E in 1973-74

A. Hale County

Based on the positive results in Walker County, the project has been continued and implemented in the Hale County, Alabama schools. Undergraduate students who are enrolled in methods courses for the trainable or educable mentally retarded are participants as interns. Students replace regularly employed teachers one full afternoon each week while the latter receive three hours of instruction from faculty members of the Area of Special Education on problems specifically related to their

classrooms.

B. Vertical Team

A new dimension to the field-service model has been developed and is currently being operated in the Tuscaloosa City Schools on a pilot basis. This dimension, while an expansion of the R*O*T*E program, has no teacher instruction component. It does, however, have a demonstration component for in-service purposes. (See Vertical Team Manual - Appendix B)

A vertical team may be described as three to four members who function at different skill levels (hierarchically) and who assume different levels of responsibility. The team is composed of:

1. A Special Education Area program coordinator who assumes ultimate responsibility for a team's work and their learning experience.

2. A doctoral student who assumes primary responsibility for the team's functioning as spelled out in the team manual.

3. A master's student who assumes responsibility for the undergraduate members' learning experience.

4. One or two undergraduates who are responsible for carrying out tasks as determined by the total team.

In addition, each resource or classroom teacher with whom the team works is considered a team member and, if possible, will attend team meetings.

The major goals of the vertical team are to:

1. Demonstrate the feasibility of moving a team of pre-service teachers into individual children's ecological "communities," and finding ways to help each "community" make the necessary changes to gradually move the child back into the educational "mainstream."

2. Demonstrate that a vertical team approach offers an enriched practicum experience for all team members - allowing more supervisory experiences for the graduate students and more training experience for undergraduates. The process of team decision making will expose all members to more skills and, of course, to the skill of group problem solving.

3. Provide more manpower to individual resource classes which means more individual attention for students in those classes.

4. Provide reality oriented training for students preparing to work with the handicapped.

The vertical team is designed to function as a crisis-resource component for any school system wishing its services. The team, which is highly mobile, can be moved in and out of school systems on a need basis. When fully operational, the vertical teams will be available on call in a manner analagous to a speaker's bureau. All categories of exceptional children will be served. To date, the vertical teams operating in the Tuscaloosa City Schools have moved between two schools with high Black disadvantaged populations. Their success and acceptance by the schools has been most exemplary and the demand for additional teams is growing steadily.

While the teams have a real service value, their impact on the training of students has been most significant. The undergraduate student has benefited greatly from the interaction with the master's and doctoral students. The latter likely have experience great growth from the supervisory and advisory relationship with the undergraduate. Added to this the problem-solving orientation of the vertical team concept in "real" settings and one can readily assess its unique training value for participating students.

Improvement in Teacher Education

R*O*T*E is an improvement in teacher education because it brings the teacher educator and his trainee into maximum contact with the pupil and teacher in a real public school setting. The teacher educator operates within the context of the field itself and not on the campus which is too frequently isolated or insulated from the actual learning milieu of the child. It is through this mutual and reciprocal interaction of the student, teacher educator, classroom teacher, and pupil that meaningful teacher education occurs.

R*O*T*E also provides an opportunity for the student to pre-test his teaching skill as well as validate his teaching interest prior to the student teaching assignment. If he finds it difficult to control a classroom environment during his R*O*T*E experience, time remains for him to correct this prior to student teaching. Then, while a student teacher, he can evaluate the effectiveness of his correction. This is an extremely important dimension fo the R*O*T*E program when one considers that many students do not complete the formalized student teaching assignment until their last semester or quarter on campus as an undergraduate. When the latter occurs, the student enters the field with a built-in deficiency which must be remediated, if at all, through in-service education or self-improvement. The opportunity, therefore, to remediate certain skill voids prior to the formal student teaching semester is extremely more viable and expedient.

R*O*T*E provides the teacher educator with an opportunity highly analogous to that of his student trainee in that he too may assess skills and knowledges relating to current educational practices. The opportunity to interact actively in the field enables the professor to up-date his teaching in line with changes that have occurred

in the ever-changing public school systems. This renewal of the teacher educator will contribute greatly to the overall improvement of teacher education at both the pre-service and in-service levels.

Lastly, R*O*T*E gives the classroom teacher an opportunity to actively participate in determining the content of her in-service program via the needs analysis as well as granting her the chance to aide directly the pre-service student. In R*O*T*E, the instruction by the professor is geared to the felt needs of the teachers as they've encountered them in their teaching activities. Here, as in all good classroom techniques, the instruction is learner oriented and made experientially relevant. This is most unlike much of the on-campus in-service education provided today.

In summation, R*O*T*E places the emphasis on reality. It places the student in the classroom on-his-own and gives him the ooportunity to experience first-hand the reality of being totally responsible for the learning experiences of a classroom of exceptional children. He assumes this responsibility in real settings where the action truly is! Students do not have to simulate or imagine what is meant by educating rural disadvantaged exceptional children; they can instead experience it directly through teaching exceptional children. While the student learns to feel the gravity of full-time teaching, his training faculty is learning, as well as being up-dated, at the same time. Each member of this broadened approach to teacher education is greatly enhanced by the reciprocity of interaction with the other in a truly unified effort. There are few approaches which have the potential to improve teacher education more than R*O*T*E.